

# Paint Wastes...What can Households Do?

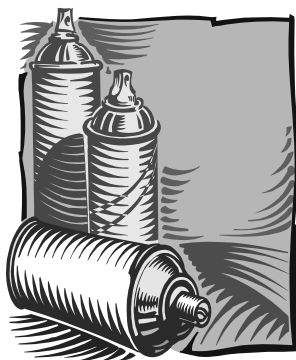
At one time or another, every household has generated paint wastes. So what's the deal with leftover paint? Paints and other coatings are either latex or oil-based. While latex paints are water-based, oil-based paints are made with solvents (such as mineral spirits (naphtha), toluene, and xylene). Solvents are more harmful to human health than water-based products. When paint is disposed of improperly, these chemicals can contaminate the environment.

## So what can you do?

1. When buying paint:
  - a. Choose the least toxic product for your project.
  - b. Take time to plan the project. Measure the area to be painted and don't forget to subtract areas such as windows and doors. Then buy only the paint you need. Read the label to find how much each gallon will cover - - normally 450 square feet. The label will also tell you other important facts.
  - c. Always buy the best quality paint you can afford. A high quality paint can last twice as long as a cheaper product if it is applied according to label directions.
  - d. Remember, the paint you buy and don't use today will need to be stored or disposed of. A gallon may seem like a better bargain even though you only need a quart. But what will you do with the leftovers? Storage and disposal can cost money too.
2. When cleaning up:
  - a. Latex - Wash your brushes with soap and water. Small amounts of latex will not hurt the sanitary sewer. But always avoid putting any chemical into your septic system or storm sewer. It's better to wash brushes on the lawn than to use your septic system.
  - b. Oil-based - If you are using an oil-based paint, you will need to clean brushes with a solvent. Allow used solvent or thinner to settle in a sealed jar. Then pour off the clear solvent into a second container for reuse. Dry out the solids, wrap in newspaper, and place in the trash can.
3. When storing your leftover paint:
  - a. The lid is the seal on your can. Take care of the lid. As you open the can, break the seal all the way around to prevent the lid from warping. Wipe off all excess paint before replacing the lid. A properly sealed can will not leak fumes.

- b. Make sure the lid is secured to prevent leakage. Then store sealed cans upside down to create an air tight seal around the lid. Leaking oil-based paints stored in a home may cause health problems. Store latex paint where it will not freeze. The label directions tell you how to preserve paint quality.
4. Use up leftover paint:
- a. The best thing to do with leftover paint is to use it up! If you can't use it, give it to someone who can, such as a church, daycare center, theater group, recreation department, community service organizations or neighbors.
  - b. Properly stored paint can have a shelf live of 10 to 15 years. As a general rule, paint that mixes smoothly and becomes "creamy" when stirred is still good. If latex paint has been frozen, brush it on a newspaper. If there are no lumps, it hasn't been damaged and can be used.
  - c. To test leftover paint, do a patch test:
    - i. Clean the surface to be painted.
    - ii. Paint a 3 - to 4 - inch test area.
    - iii. Allow the paint to dry for 48 hours.
    - iv. Place a piece of masking tape on the test area. Quickly pull the tape off. If the paint comes off on the tape, don't use it.

## What about Paint in Aerosol Cans?



Some paints are sold in aerosol cans, which can pose additional hazards. First, aerosols contain propellants and carrier gases used to disperse the paint. Second, they may burst explosively when heated, punctured or crushed. Try to choose air-pump sprayers over aerosols. Always read label directions and try to avoid using aerosols in your home. Aerosols also come in several sizes, purchase only what you need to complete your project. If you do not completely use the aerosol paint and want to save it for later use, turn the can upside down and spray onto newspaper. This will keep the spray tip from clogging. Follow disposal directions on the label.

## What can you do when you can't use it up?

Disposal is the last resort. If you must dispose of paint try contacting your community to see if they have a household hazardous waste collection program and dispose of it there. If you must throw paint away, please dry it out first. Dried paint is not as harmful to the environment.

Paint should be dried outside the home because as it dries, vapors and fumes escape. Find a safe ventilated work area away from children, pets or vandals. Warm and dry weather is best.

### **Cans Almost Empty (Less than 1/3 Full)**

Add cat litter or floor dry to the paint and stir. Leave the lid off the can while it dries. When dry replace the lid and write “dried” on the can. You can then place the can in the trash. Both oil-based and latex paint can be quickly dried in this way.

### **Cans Mostly Full (More than 1/3 Full)**

The can will not be big enough to hold the waste paint *and* the absorbent material. Split the paint into smaller amounts using other containers. Empty paint cans work well. Put equal amounts of paint into each can. Dry as described above.

If you don't have empty paint cans, you can use a cardboard box. First, put a plastic bag in the open box, draping the top of the open bag over the sides of the box. Second, add no more than 3 inches of absorbent material. Third, add only as much paint as the material will absorb. You can dry the rest in the can, find another container or add another layer to your box when the first layer is dry. When dry tie the bag and close the box. Place the box or can of dried paint next to your garbage can.

### **Please Don't Put Paint in the Drain!**

Paints may contain solvents and metals that can pollute your water if disposed of carelessly. Oil-based solvents are more harmful than latex. Paints used to be made with more metals. Lead, cadmium, chromium and mercury may still be found in paints older than 15 years.

If paint is poured down the drain, it may cause problems in a septic system or even a wastewater treatment system. Never place any chemical into a storm sewer, since storm sewers empty into rivers, lakes, and streams.

Once these chemicals become waste, they can pollute the water you are drinking. Modern landfills protect the groundwater with leak-proof liners. However, the short time you spend drying out your paint can prevent it from ever polluting surface water or groundwater. Once groundwater becomes polluted, it is very difficult to clean up.